

# An exploration into the problematic public policies and the leadership challenge for socio-economic transformation in South Africa

Public policies

37

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to explore the problematic of public policies and leadership challenges for socio-economic transformation in South Africa. The paper illustrates that policies and laws of socio-economic reform have been introduced in democratic South Africa. However, socio-economic transformation remains a challenge. Lack of trust in the leadership relationships amongst political and economic agents is pointed as a contributing factor. Hence, LE emerges as a leadership strategy to help mitigate the problem.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper starts by presenting the current economic situation of South Africa touching on some important economic indicators to illustrate the consequences of poor leadership in public policy implementation process. The paper then analyses the leadership challenges to drive socio-economic reforms that have been introduced in South Africa since the end of apartheid with focus on the current National Development Plan. Lack of trust in leadership is identified as a problematic factor and leadership ethos (LE) emerges as a leadership strategy to enable the building of trust in leadership for the purpose of a successful implementation of public policies.

**Findings** – Lack of trust in leadership is identified as a problematic factor contributing in the absence of cooperation and collaboration in the leadership relationship amongst public servants (from up to bottom) and citizens for the purpose of successful implementation of public policies. Hence, there is need for a new leadership paradigm that would enable the building of trust in these leadership relationships. LE emerges as such a leadership strategy.

**Practical implications** – The paper calls for an exploration into the understanding and practice of LE and its inherent critical success factors (CSFs) considered as a leadership strategy that can help drive particularly public policies implementation process. LE intends to promote moral leadership that helps public servants to build good character and thus the will to do the right thing, and mutually trusting relationship is a CSF of LE. Therefore LE enables build the much needed trust in leadership relationships for a successful organisational leadership and management.

**Originality/value** – This paper provides significant implications by identifying lack of trust as a problematic factor in the leadership relationships amongst political and economic agents in South Africa, contributing thus in the poor implementation of public policies. LE emerges as a leadership strategy that would help mitigate the problem by enabling the building, the maintenance and



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restoration of trust in organisational and or institutional management for a successful public policy implementation process.

**Keywords** South Africa, Trust, Public Policies, Leadership Ethos, Socio-economic Transformation, The National Development Plan (NDP)

**Paper type** General review

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Recent historical facts reveal that South Africa has enjoyed a good spell of political stability (arguably), free from armed conflicts and relatively peaceful with little disruptions to economic growth and development since the advent of democracy over three decades ago. The end of Apartheid has been characterised by the 1994 democratic election, taking to power the late and first black President of the modern South Africa, Nelson Mandela (1994-1999), subsequently succeeded by Thabo Mbeki (1999-2008), Kgalema Motlanthe (2008-2009), Jacob Zuma (2009-2018) and now Cyril Ramaphosa (2018).

Despite the apparent political stability, the economic performance has not been at its best to enable a quick turnaround of the apartheid inflicted damage and legacy to the society to date. As a matter of fact, South Africa had the 27th biggest economy in the world, accounting for almost 25 per cent of the GDP of the entire African continent ([South Africa: The Good News, 2017](#)). More recently, research findings suggest that the forecast for real gross domestic product (GDP) growth has been at 0.8 per cent in 2016, down from 1.3 per cent in 2015 and the lowest rate of growth since 2009. Growth was forecast at 1.1 per cent but grew at 1.3 per cent in 2017 ([World Bank, 2018](#)). Overall, South Africa was projected to remain largely below the average growth rate of 4.5 per cent for sub-Saharan Africa in 2016-2017. Currently sitting at -2.2 per cent in the first quarter (Q1) and -0.7 per cent (Q2) of 2018 ([StatsSA, 2018](#)). Against this backdrop, poverty in South Africa is set to rise as incomes fall, placing the National Development Plan (NDP) goals of the eradication of extreme poverty, reduction in joblessness and doubling of incomes by 2030 further out of reach.

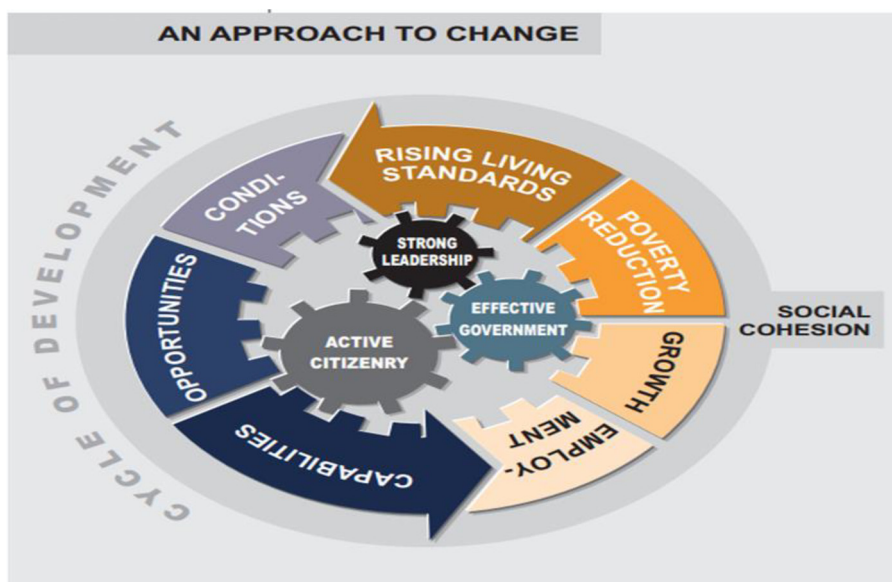
### **Political and economic situation: an in-depth analysis of public policies in the light of economic growth and development**

The end of apartheid gave birth to a new era which through the Constitution of the Republic promoted freedom (see Constitution of the [Republic of South Africa, 1996](#)). It meant that through the Bill of Rights (see Constitution of the [Republic of South Africa, 1996](#) – Chapter 2: Bill of Rights), the black person would no longer be a shell, a shadow of a man, completely defeated, drowned in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity, but instead that “black people” were masters of their own destiny. They were free to choose what to do, how to do it and when to do what they thought was good to them and would contribute to their development and put an end to suffering that they had been enduring all along. The country adopted a multi-party state as the political system with the African National Congress (ANC), the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) led by Cyril Ramaphosa, Mmusi Maimane and Julius Malema respectively amongst the leading political parties. South Africa is a parliamentary representative democratic republic wherein the president of the country is elected by parliament. Such a political stability enabled the subsequent governments formulate socio-economic policies used as instruments to drive various reform programmes intended to overturn the legacy of apartheid therefore enhance economic growth and development. The National Development Plan (NDP) is the latest policy document challenged to succeed where others had stumbled.

The need for a new approach to materialise the reform process initiated with the administration of the late and former President Nelson Mandela has been stimulated by failure and limitation in the implementation process of previous programmes namely the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP); The Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy; The Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA); The Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) and The New Growth Path (NGP). It is within such a context that the NDP emerged following critics of the previous policies which decry on the one hand an extensive regulatory framework while, on the other hand, they outcry the lack of adequate human capital (Fedderke, 2015) or leaders with personal integrity (Lei *et al.*, 2014) to drive the implementation process. For the purpose of this paper, focus is on the latter critic because history teaches that change resonates on leadership.

Launched in 2013, the programme was established and viewed as a policy blueprint for eliminating poverty and reducing inequality in South Africa by 2030. The objectives by 2030 include the elimination of income poverty – to reduce the proportion of households with a monthly income below R419 per person (in 2009 prices) from 39 to 0 per cent. A further objective is the reduction of inequality – the Gini coefficient should fall from 0.69 to 0.6 (RSA, 2013, p. 24). Its strength is that the key constraints to faster growth had already been identified. The National Planning Commission (NPC) presented a roadmap to a more inclusive economy (Manuel, 2015). The NDP is presented by the government as a new approach to change (see Figure 1 for NDP – A new approach to change, RSA, 2013, for more detail).

One of the key elements in this new approach to change, as indicated in Figure 1 above, is strong leadership required from government, business, labour and civil society to guarantee the successful implementation of the plan. Suggesting that one contributing factor of failure



Source: RSA (2013, p. 16)

Figure 1.  
NDP – a new  
approach to change

in previous attempts to implement policies has been recognised and identified. Strong leadership implies, “leaders that are willing and able to take on greater responsibility to address South Africa’s challenges” (RSA, 2013, p. 47). However, in this plan, there is recognition of lack of trust, suggesting high levels of mistrust amongst major social partners (government, business, labour, and civil society) in South Africa which is impeding collaboration and partnership with a view of realising a common purpose (RSA, 2013, p. 47). In this respect, strong leadership is significant in a way that it will enable what is regarded as “a virtuous cycle of building trust and engaging in discussion to confront the most pressing challenges” (RSA, 2013, p. 47).

### **Trust: a critical success factor in organisational leadership and management**

Trust, according to the economic-rationalist theory, has been regarded as a defining factor of success or failure in any organisational relationships (Hosmer, 1995; Reina and Reina, 2015). In the public sector context moreover, a study by Pate *et al.* (2007) on trust in senior management in the public sector verifies that there is a persistent lack of trust in senior management making it very difficult to manage the workforce as lack of trust has significant implications for employee attitudes and behaviour. In response, Esau (2016) explores institutional trust and organisational performance looking at the ways in which trust is inculcated through public institutions. Her study reveals that organisational structuring and institutional capacity development are important for generating the much needed institutional trust to facilitate workforce management. More recently, Fairholm *et al.*'s (2018) talk of trust–culture leadership in local government as an emerging model of leadership in which trust is a major component especially in public organisations, while Höglund *et al.*'s (2018) study on the impact of types of trust in the public sector assumes that trust is a complex, multidimensional and dynamic concept that must be discussed and analysed at its various levels of understanding including the cognitive, affective, contractual, competence and goodwill to make the collaboration between a public organisation and its board work as intended. These initiatives can be achieved if the mind sets, character traits and dispositions considered key foundations of ethical relationships that would implicitly encompass moral duties owed to others (Hursthouse, 2007) are developed and duly established.

The NDP, although promising on how it has been conceptualised, also faces challenges that could undermine its successful implementation and get the same sort of results as the previous five programmes if the current trend of the socio-economic development is not quickly stopped and overturned. These include the annual Consumer Price Inflation (CPI) sitting at 5.1 per cent (July 2018), compared to 4.4 per cent (May 2018) down from 4.5 per cent (April 2018). The annual percentage change in the Producer Price Index (PPI) for final manufactured goods has been at 6.1 (July 2018) from 4.6 per cent (May 2018) and 4.4 per cent (April 2018), increasing by 1.7 per cent in the process; the unemployment rate has been registered at 27.2 per cent (Q2, 2018) compared to 26.7 per cent (Q1, 2018) an increase of 0.5 per cent in the process while the fall of the GDP has been constant: 0.7 per cent (Q2, 2018) and 2.2 per cent (Q1, 2018) according to StatsSA (2018). These indicators suggest that a lot still has to be done to achieve the NDP's set objectives.

### **Leadership ethos: a missing ingredient in leadership recipe for successful public policy implementation process**

The term “ethos” may be regarded as the distinguishing features, beliefs or moral values of a group, or institution (Online Collins English Dictionary, n. d.). Seen from a broader anthropological perspective, it may refer to the distinctive spirit of a culture or an era (Online

Dictionary of Etymology, n. d.). The term “ethos” is thus used to describe certain features of a home, a group or a whole era. By contrast the term “ethos” may also be used to refer to the character, virtues and moral selfhood pertaining to a person, group, culture, or movement (Online Collins English Dictionary, n. d.). Along a similar line, the term could also indicate a certain “attitude”, predisposition or comportment towards others, suggesting a particular bond with others as stated by Anthony Burgess, “They cultivated a subversive alternative ethos” (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language Online, n.d.) underpinning the essence of “ethos” as the disposition, character, or fundamental values peculiar to a specific person, people, culture, or movement. For the purposes of this study these connotations may be integrated to focus on the characteristic ways in which particular groups (for example families, institutions, organisations, movements, sub-cultures) enact, embody and practise their moral convictions and moral judgements, their sense of what is right and what is wrong. Such moral convictions may be expressed with reference to a range of ethical concepts, including moral visions, virtues, social values, goals and obligations or rules (Conradie and Abrahams, 2006, p. 2). Therefore, LE incorporates the moral judgement by which leadership is embodied within “influence relationships” (Rost, 1991). For example, one may judge something or someone (an act, a person, an institution, a society or a form of leadership) to be virtuous, moral, immoral or indeed amoral – constituting a continuum through which moral duties and responsibilities are fulfilled. LE is associated with actions which add value, honour commitments to stakeholders and society, and obey laws (Caldwell et al., 2015). In influencing others, leaders are most effective when they are perceived as ethical stewards – choosing service over self-interest (Block, 2013), maintaining a long-term perspective about wealth creation, and treating others as trusted owners and partners (Pfeffer, 1998). A morally virtuous leader is perceived as highly responsible, committed to the best interests of others, and effective at achieving results that come from highly motivated and engaged team members (Paine, 2002).

In this respect, LE translates into a moral leadership ability that helps build good character and thus the will to do the right thing such as being transparent and honest (Ndalamba and Caldwell, 2017; Ndalamba, 2018a, 2018b). It transpires that the above account points to the lack of such a leadership approach. This is evidenced by ways in which office bearers at the highest level of leadership in the South Africa conducted themselves in recent years. Over the past five years or so, the political and administrative leadership on the part of the former President Jacob Zuma came under intense scrutiny, resulting in both the opposition political parties and civil society organisations calling for President Jacob Zuma to step down [British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) News, 2017a]. A number of political misdemeanours, characterised by arrogant and dismissive responses from the president, were deemed acceptable by the ruling African National Congress (ANC), who chose to close ranks behind their leader rather than observe the country’s Constitution back then. Most noteworthy on the lengthy list of questionable deeds attributable to the president, is the “Nkandla saga”. This refers to a project aimed at upgrading the sprawling private residence of the then President Jacob Zuma in his home village of Nkandla in Kwazulu-Natal, using money from the taxpayer (Rossouw and Roper, 2009). However, lack of transparency and honesty when dealing with finances, contractors, and tender procedures, is the outstanding feature in this saga. As such, this underscored what is regarded as “unethical” leadership practices from public managers. As a result, the opposition parties exposed the perceived corruption and succeeded in escalating the matter to the Office of the Public Protector, whose Office produced a damning Report (RSA, 2014) ordering the President to repay a significant portion of the money spent on the upgrade.

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After his refusal to repay the money, the Constitutional Court stepped in to ensure that this constitutional obligation was fulfilled.

In another bizarre move, the then President Zuma took a decision to reshuffle the cabinet without consulting with his ministers and other officials in his party, the African National Congress (ANC). This risky demeanour raised serious questions, from both the opposition parties and within his own party, about his awareness of LE ([News24, 2017](#)). His decision had an immediate negative impact on the economy of the country – Standard and Poor’s, being one of the big three ratings agencies (the other two are Moody’s and Fitch) has lowered South Africa’s sovereign debt to below investment grade. Additionally, the country’s currency, the rand (ZAR), lost ground, bonds and banking shares fell and there was a general air of impending doom and uncertainty [[British Broadcasting Corporation \(BBC\) News, 2017b](#)]. What was adding to the country’s woes, was the then President’s perceived close (and corrupt) relations with an influential family of businessmen (the Gupta family). Of greatest concern was the Gupta family’s influence and manipulation of public officials and their seeming interference in the appointment of political leaders, with underlying corruption and shady deals at the core of their relations with the president [[British Broadcasting Corporation \(BBC\) News, 2015a](#)].

Another scandal associated with the President Zuma’s administration erupted, involving this time the Department of Social Development and the agency responsible for the disbursement of state pensions and grants (the South African Social Security Agency – SASSA). This serves as another illustration pointing to the need to explore the awareness by public managers of LE that should lead to organisational efficiency and effectiveness. In fact, the issue under scrutiny had to do once again with transparency in the tender process, wherein a company – Cash Paymaster Services (CPS) – was awarded the contract to pay out pensions and grants, was declared unlawful and declared invalid by the Constitutional Court ([Herald Live, 2017b](#)). As a result, there was much anxiety about whether grants would be paid out on the stipulated date (01 April 2017), leading to the resignation of the Director General of that department ([Herald Live, 2017a](#)). Although grants were paid on 01 April 2017, following the extension of the contract with the CPS for one more year, the question here is on the unnecessary court processes and the anxiety that pensioners and social welfare grant holders faced as a result of seemingly poor leadership. There has also not been any mention of any corrective action to be taken against the Minister for orchestrating this debacle.

These scandals have exposed the inefficiencies and serious irregularities – gaps in the ways in which certain government departments have been conducting their businesses, at great expense to the South African tax-payers losing their trust in the process. Within the context of this paper, such inefficiencies and irregularities demonstrated in public management, point to unethical forms of leadership, which are inconsistent with the concept proposed by LE. The LE concept aims at promoting integrity-based approaches to leadership based on trust ([Ndalamba and Caldwell, 2017](#)). Failing to conform to the appropriate requirements and procedures with regard, particularly, to the finances, contractors, and tender processes, raises questions about the very notion of “integrity” in the practice of leadership in public management. Integrity in leadership is amongst the attributes that enhance moral leadership that helps public servants to build good character and thus the will to do the right thing – practices that contribute in the building and establishment of trust between leaders and followers, without which it would be difficult to achieve organisational cooperation.

This would enhance efficiency with a view of increasing performance to produce satisfactory results (Caldwell, 2012).

In this respect, practices that do not conform with integrity-based approaches in leadership relationships invariably result in rampant corruption amongst managers, stealing of resources, trade barriers stopping exports, poorly developed property rights and appalling infrastructure, chronic malnutrition and disease, lack of sanitation, drinking water and energy (electric power) to sustain the economy, and significant levels of illiteracy (Staley, 2008). The advent of democracy in South Africa was supposed to lead to transformed socio-economic structures creating the basis and conditions to improve the lives of the citizens. In most cases, this has not been happening because of the unethical leadership practices verified in public management, in particular, as illustrated above. Nelson Mandela pointed to this phenomenon by stressing the following:

The symptoms of our spiritual malaise are only too familiar. They include the extent of corruption in both the public and private sector, where office and positions of responsibility are treated as opportunities for self-enrichment. The corruption that occurs within our justice system; violence in interpersonal relations and families in particular, the shameful record of abuse of women and children; and the extent of evasion of tax and refusal to pay for services used (Mandela, 1998).

With regard to corruption in both the public and private sector and the use of office and positions of responsibility as opportunities for self-enrichment, unethical practices are common and are regarded as “informally institutionalised” in public management (Jauch and Muchena, 2011). Such a leadership practice in public management underscores levels of moral degeneration – suggesting moral chaos referred to by Mandela (1998) – whose results can only be unsatisfactory in terms of performance associated with social transformation, prompting thus the need for LE in the context of the public sector. In this view, following its attributes – *vision* (Kantabutra and Avery, 2002; Ndalamba *et al.* 2018), *virtues* (Crossan *et al.* 2013; Aristotle, 2013), *values* (Graham, *et al.* 2013) and *obligation* (Conradie and Abrahams, 2006) – LE is less about rules, programmes and frameworks and more about personal and professional integrity with the aim to promote, “moral leadership that helps public servants to build good character and thus the will to do the right thing” (Stevulak and Brown, 2011, p. 103). LE emerges as a culture and value system within the organisation incorporating the moral judgement by which leadership is embodied within “influence relationships” (Rost, 1991), therefore a leadership strategy, indispensable, if an organisation or institution intends to promote organisational trust that will help achieve its objectives – successful implementation of public policies in this case.

#### *Action steps for the implementation and practice of leadership ethos*

- Establish character such as honesty in leadership relationship to promote mutual trust within the organisation (Hosmer, 1995; Reina and Reina, 2015; Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010; Esau, 2016).
- Demonstrate compassion in leadership relationship within the organisation (Kouzes and Posner, 2012; Hayes, 2015).
- Promote commitment to effectiveness in reaching the objectives in organisation management (Homrig, 2001; Mayer, 1995).
- Promote cooperation and participation in leadership relationship within the organisation (Pfeffer, 1998; McKee, 2008; Caldwell *et al.*, 2015; Smith *et al.*, 2016).

*Implications of the paper*

In addressing the importance of practising LE in organisation management, particularly with regard to public policy implementation process, this paper makes four meaningful contributions.

- (1) It offers an understanding of the current state of South Africa with regard to socio-economic and political situation through an analysis of the NDP identifying the gaps and challenges.
- (2) It presents updated socio-economic data as a reflection of the ways in which public policies have been implemented within a “non-orthodox” leadership framework.
- (3) It identifies LE as a leadership strategy and framework that addresses the problem by building, maintaining and restoring trust. This will create conditions for a successful implementation of public policy with a view of overturning the current socio-economic situation.
- (4) It offers four action steps for the implementation and practice of LE, leaving room for debate and further discussion with scholars and practitioners.

**Conclusion**

It became apparent, from the backdrop of the above, that the lack of a strong leadership (RSA, 2013, p. 16) produces effects on economic growth and development. The economic outlook of the South Africa presents two scenarios leading to mixed feelings. On the one hand, there is recognition of efforts that are being made to change the course of history and the negative trends attached to the reform process along the years. On the other hand, the economic outlook outlines and points to little impact of such efforts on the ground. This means that not much is happening in terms of improving the socio-economic conditions and lives of ordinary citizens, hence the need to engage seriously in search for an adequate and appropriate response. One way would be firstly, to acknowledge the facts, that, the low growth trajectory provides a major challenge for government and citizens. Then, the need to prioritise spending better, implement plans more effectively and make a greater impact. Finally, the need to build the widest possible partnership to promote consensus and action on a programme for inclusive growth and transformation. This requires moral leadership that helps both politicians and public servants to build good character and thus the will to do the right thing, and LE emerges as the needed strong leadership strategy (Ndalamba and Caldwell, 2017) to enable the building, maintenance and restoration of organisational and or institutional trust in public management, which in turn will help overturn the current socio-economic trends in South Africa.

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